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Michael Windle
Lihya / Portraits





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The Old Town of Damascus is littered with small barber-shops where traditionally the local men meet socially for conversation and tea. While on residency there in the summer of 2010 I made a short documentary “Lihya” (30 mins) in Adel Al 3aiek’s shop near Omayad, the largest and perhaps most famous mosque in Syria.

In the tiny street opposite where Adel’s shop is sits the equally ancient but much better known Al Nawfara Coffeehouse. This is home to Abu Shadi the current “Storyteller of Damascus”. His tradition is of one-man theatre, each night recounting traditional tales from the Arab tribes. The changing audience are vocal in response, joining into the spirit of the evening, using the old stories as ways of interpreting more recent events, unusual in a public arena in Syria.

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In the midst of another project I co-opted three filmmakers I was working with, Erfan Khalifa, Nisrine Boukhari and Iman Hasbani, to help shoot a film of me having a haircut and shave (Lihya means beard in Arabic). Erfan acted as a translator in the improvised dialogue/narration of the film as a fellow artist. The stillness of the setting and the sounds from outside help amplify the contrasting stories from inside as we compare our experiences as artists from very different countries touching on topics such as photography, music, (mis)pronunciation of Arabic and the religious significance of a beard.

We did not know this small encounter between Christian, Sunni and Druze was just weeks away from the eruption of the Arab Spring and subsequent incendiary events across Syria. It would be very difficult to make this film just now. The residency was funded by the British Council, the Delfina Foundation London and AllArtNow Damascus.

Lihya was first shown during the Glasgow Short Film Festival in 2011 as part of the "Talk To Me" strand, and is currently being processed for US streaming film company Indieflix for their political channel.

www.porty.net/damascus



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FILM FESTIVAL

Michael Windle Lihya / Portraits

Having spent much of my adult life as a painter the urge to explore possibilities with video has had difficulties. The drive to retain my normal studio workflow and reluctance to employ actors or even embark on script development is obviously problematic. I have long been an admirer of the micro production techniques and “ethno-fictions” of filmmakers such as Ross McElwee and Jean Rouch, and decided a workable direction to take would be small scale documentary. This approach however would entertain aspects of painting I find most interesting, those of immediacy and ambiguity.

Encouraged by reactions to Lihya I decided to embark on a series of small documentaries, using the sort of feedback loop of having my portrait painted, and me filming it. Only myself, my handheld camcorder and the subject are present, in an attempt to retain the intimacy of a homemade informal conversation exploring my relationship with the subject and the subject's work and thoughts on portraiture and the place of painting now we are in the 21st century.

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